SEX

Moral Panic About Rough Sex Gives Way to Censorship in the UK

British regulators and lawmakers are hot on a measure that would make possessing or publishing strangulation porn a crime.

ELIZABETH NOLAN BROWN | 11.12.2025 12:15 PM

(DPST/Newscom)

Second-wave feminism of the worst sort is alive and well in Britain, apparently. The United Kingdom is on its way to criminalizing depictions of choking during sex, in a move it describes as boosting "protection for women and girls."

The ban wouldn't just apply to disturbing or publishing such porn, but also *possessing* it. It also wouldn't matter if the images were AI-generated.

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Proponents of the law suggest the mere existence of choking porn harms women, even when it's created consensually between adults and even though many women enjoy "breath play" like light strangulation or suffocation during sex.

In the name of "protection," the U.K. government wants to control what women can look at, create, and do with their bodies. Cool, cool, cool.

Members of Parliament are also proposing a range of other regulations related to sex work, including one that would define publishing sex worker ads as "pimping" and another that could criminalize paying sex workers for webcam performances.

The Choking Amendment

The proposed ban was introduced on November 3 as an amendment to the U.K.'s Crime and Policing Bill, which is currently winding its way through the British Parliament. The bill has passed the House of Commons and now resides with the House of Lords.

While it still has a ways to go—committee sessions are scheduled through the end of January 2026—the crime bill is expected to pass and would also ban protesting outside of the homes of judges and politicians, among other provisions.

The amendment, proposed by House of Lords member Alison Levitt of the Labour Party, would make it illegal to possess a pornographic image (defined as any image that was produced "solely or principally for the purpose of sexual arousal") if it "portrays, in an explicit and realistic way, a person strangling or suffocating another person, and (c) a reasonable person looking at the image would think that the persons were real."

"Publishing" such material would also be illegal, with publishing defined as simply "giving or making it available to another person by any means."

So, anyone who has previously downloaded or purchased any BDSM porn could be prosecuted. So could, it seems, anyone with a copy of the *50 Shades of Grey* movies. And, of course, so could the many people who create, distribute, or enjoy erotica and pornography of the sort that mainstream media like the *50 Shades* series popularized.

Under Levitt's amendment, a person convicted of possession could be imprisoned for up to two years, and a person convicted of publication could be imprisoned for up to five years.

Someone who photographed or filmed *themselves* engaging in sex involving strangulation might still wind up charged, but if so, it's at least considered a defense: "the person directly participated in the act portrayed and the act did not involve the infliction of any non-consensual harm on any person."

But even individuals who want the world to see their sexual proclivities would run up against requirements that web platforms aggressively censor it. According to a government explainer about the bill, "the depiction of strangulation in pornography will be designated as a priority offence under the Online Safety Act, meaning platforms…will be required to take proactive steps to prevent users from seeing illegal strangulation and suffocation content. This could include companies using automated systems to pre-emptively detect and hide the images, moderation tools or stricter content policies to prevent abusive content from circulating."

Who Exactly Is Being Protected?

The government makes no attempt to hide that its aim is regulating private sexual behavior (of the sort that many women as well as men enjoy). Platforms "will be held accountable [for] ensuring content does not spread, which can lead to normalising harmful practices in people's private lives," it said.

In recent years, there has been a lot of uproar about sexual choking from feminist and conservative activists, as well as antiporn crusaders and politicians. These parties portray it as a porn-driven phenomenon foisted upon unsuspecting and generally nonconsenting women, a prelude to abusive relationships, and a driver of violence and misogyny against women and girls.

But research has shown that many women enjoy rough sex, including sexual activity that involves strangulation; that women are likely to choke male partners, too; and that much of the time, it doesn't result in physical harm.

A survey of U.S. college and graduate students found that choking during sex was generally consensual (92 percent of the time), and that "fewer than 1% of participants reported that their partner had ever lost consciousness due to their choking them." In that study, women, transgender, and nonbinary students were more likely than men to describe choking as pleasurable.

That last bit lines up with what Aella found in a poll about kinky sex, in which nearly 30 percent of female respondents said they found choking during sex to be erotic, compared to under 20 percent of men.

A poll of Australian young people found women were more likely to ask for choking during sex than men. That study also found that while porn was one common way that people first learned about sexual strangulation play, it was far from the only way, cited by just 35 percent of respondents. And while 61 percent of participants said they had at some point been exposed to depictions or information about sexual choking from pornography, movies (40.3 percent), friends (31.9 percent), social media (31.3%), and romantic partners (29.2%) were also sources of exposure.

A recent study, published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, found female study participants more likely than their male counterparts to say sexual aggression in porn was arousing. "About 69 percent of women in the study said they enjoyed at least some aggressive content, compared to 40 percent of men," notes Eric W. Dolan at *PsyPost*. "Women were also more likely than men to report arousal from 'harder' forms of aggression, such as choking or gagging, and were more likely to actively seek out pornographic videos that featured aggression."

Of course, sexual choking and suffocation during sex *can* be dangerous if done incorrectly or taken too far. (And some, like dominatrix and writer Mistress Matisse, even suggest that there's no truly safe way to choke or strangle someone.)

But simply banning depictions of choking in porn movies does nothing to help people assess the risks or to engage in such activities as safely as possible. And since data shows that sexual strangulation is common and no longer taboo, "banning choking porn does nothing but make the practice seem more edgy, all while doing nothing to actually aid sex education resources on risk-aware breath play," as culture writer Ana Valens suggests.

Folks who are truly worried about protecting women would be better off raising awareness about potential physical dangers and how—if at all—to engage safely, rather than getting all Andrea Dworkin about it. Ranting about the "normalization" of violence against women, acting like this is some great conspiracy against them (rather than a thing many willingly partake in, and sometimes even enjoy), and suggesting we can end private sexual behavior through throwing people in jail will do nothing to make people's actual sexual lives safer.

Other Porn Amendments in the U.K. Crime Bill

The choking porn ban isn't the only proposed amendment related to erotic and sexual imagery.

One amendment would let porn performers retroactively withdraw consent for their material to be published online, leaving people vulnerable to legal action if they don't take down a video anytime anyone who appears in it asks them to. The provision makes no allowances for situations in which a company has contracted and paid for particular videos

or images already, simply stating that people must take down content if consent is revoked after it's up.

The amendment—from House of Lords members Gabby Bertin, Beeban Kidron, Helena Kennedy, and Tim Clement-Jones (a mix of conservative, labor, and liberal party members)—is also incredibly confusingly written, stating that a person "commits an offence if they publish or allow or facilitate the publishing of pornographic content online where it has not been verified that…every individual featured in pornographic content on the platform, that had already published on the service when this Act is passed, is an adult."

Taken that strictly as it's written, it seems anyone who uploads porn to a web platform could be guilty of violating this statute if *any other porn ever published* on the same platform features someone under age 18.

A person violating the above section could face two years in prison, plus a fine, while a platform violating it could "be fined up to £18 million or 10 percent of their qualifying worldwide revenue, whichever is greater." The government could also order other companies—like web hosting services, domain registrars, and internet service providers—not to do business with a noncompliant site.

Another amendment, proposed by Bertin, Kidron, Kennedy, and Floella Benjamin, would make it illegal to create "an indecent photograph" where an adult purports to be a minor. Porn depicting an adult *pretending* to be someone under age 18 would thus be punished *as child pornography*.

In addition, this amendment would create a new crime of sharing any content—including "text shared on internet forums"—determined to "advocate or celebrate" adults engaging in sexual activity with a minor. One needn't celebrate or condone sexual abuse to see how this ban takes things too far. It's broad enough to criminalize a story where a college student has slept with his high school girlfriend, a positive take on the book *Lolita*, and other forms of pure *speech* that, however distasteful, don't actually involve any harm to minors being done.

Yet another amendment would make it illegal to possess, obtain, or store software designed primarily "to create or alter a digitally produced photograph or film which shows another person…in an intimate state."

My guess is that this is intended to be aimed at "nudify" software that creates realistic-looking nude imagery of real people, AI programs that create "deepfake" porn featuring celebrities, and things like that. But, again, we've got an amendment written in a ridiculously broad way. No matter what the intended target, the amendment as currently written would ban any software program primarily intended to create "intimate" images, sweeping up anything meant to make computer-generated porn. It would also ban the *possession* of any software that could do this—even if it's not the primary intent of the software—if a person intends to use it to create an image or video "which shows another person…in an intimate state," regardless of whether the person depicted has consented to such a move.

Turning Ad Platforms Into 'Pimps' and Webcamming Into Prostitution

Porn isn't the only form of sex work targeted by amendments to the crime bill. A measure proposed by House of Lords member Mary Goudie would expand the country's definition of pimping to include any facilitation of prostitution, even if it's not for the facilitator's financial gain. It would also define any publisher of ads that ultimately facilitate prostitution as pimps.

Under current law, it's illegal to cause or incite another person to engage in prostitution or to control any of another person's activities related to prostitution when done "for or in the expectation of gain for himself or a third person." Goudie's amendment would expand on this greatly, making it illegal to assist, facilitate, control, or incite anyone engaging in sexual activity for pay, "regardless of whether they secure personal financial gain, or personally benefits in any way, from" this sex act. It would also criminalize causing or allowing any advertisement for sexual activity in exchange for payment.

If this amendment passes, any platform that allows sex work advertisements could be punished. So could anyone who aids a sex worker in their activities in any way—say, by giving them a ride or letting them use their car—even if that person was in no way controlling or benefiting from this work.

And the punishment could include up to 10 years in prison.

Another amendment from Goudie would make it illegal to give or offer payment in exchange for sexual activity (something currently only illegal in the U.K. if the person being paid has been subject to force or is underage).

This amendment takes aim at sex work customers—in physical spaces and online.

The penalty on paying would apply when a sex act involves physical contact between the person paying and a sex worker *or* when it involves a sex worker "touching themselves for the sexual gratification of the other person." The touching provision doesn't seem to include any exceptions for instances when the performance is done digitally, which could make it illegal to pay someone putting on a webcam show or to directly pay a performer for a clip.

The punishment for paying for sexual activity or paying to watch someone masturbate would also be up to 10 years in prison.

The choking porn amendment has received a lot of attention recently; much less so these other amendments. I don't know if that speaks to the likelihood of them being attached to the final crime bill that passes or not. But taken all together, it shows how U.K. lawmakers across the political spectrum are keen on further policing both physical and online expressions of sexuality.

Intern at Reason

Reason is seeking a spring journalism intern. The paid internship starts in January and runs through April. Applications are due November 22. This is a great chance to gain writing and reporting experience and clips under the direction of *Reason* staffers, and to work in *Reason*'s D.C. office, which is just an amazing, fun, creative, and collegial environment full of friendly, supersmart weirdos. (I don't work from the D.C. office anymore, but I did for many years, and I miss it!)

More Sex & Tech News

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• Silicon Valley is going wild for "genetically engineered babies."

• Is it the government's job to make sure AI chatbots are safe for kids?

• Pornhub is launching a TikTok-esque platform called Shorties, featuring an endless scroll feed of vertical videos, while the former CEO of OnlyFans is launching a software porn platform called Vylit, which bills itself as a place "where sharing and earning collide, as thirst traps and everyday moments live side by side."

• The number one song on Billboard's country charts last week was "Walk My Walk" by Breaking Rust, who happens to be a robot.

Today's Image

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